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SUBJECT: VATICAN-AFFILIATED NGO ADDRESSES RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

[¶1.](#) (U) This cable is being resent due to an error found with EACT MailReader.

Summary

[¶2.](#) (U) The U.S.-based Acton Institute, an NGO with significant ties to the Vatican, explored issues related to religious freedom during a March conference in Rome (for information on the organization and/or transcripts from the conference see <http://www.acton.org/ital/>). Spanish Cardinal Julian Herranz, former president of the Pontifical Council for Legislative Texts, addressed the universal concept of the human person, his/her right to religious freedom, and the universal standards needed to promote inter-religious dialogue. Raphaela Schmid of the Pontifical Gregorian University focused on China's relationship with the Catholic Church, drawing from what she had seen while filming a television documentary on religious freedom in China. Fr. Bernardo Cervellera, China expert and editor of the Vatican-affiliated Asia News Service, was quick to point out that religious freedom and other freedoms do, in fact, exist in China, to some extent. He said that religious freedom and Christianity is in fact necessary for the development of the Chinese economy. Fr. Cervellera also made reference to the problem of Hindu nationalism in India, to Islamic-Christian relations, and to the 2008 Summer Olympic Games in Beijing. End summary.

True Participation in the Life of State

[¶3.](#) (U) Cardinal Julian Herranz referred to the Declaration of Human Rights (DHR) as he appealed for a respect for the rights of all people. He noted attention to inalienable rights, freedom, justice, and peace in the world. Herranz took Article 18 of the DHR to mean that every person has a right to freedom of thought, teaching, practice, and observance. The person is ultimately the foundation of society. He said that Sharia Islamic law, however, inflicts the death penalty on those who profess non-Islamic religion, such as in Saudi Arabia. When believers feel they are respected in faith, they truly participate in the life of state. Inter-religious dialogue can

only take place when there is a mutual respect between both parties. This respect also serves to discourage terrorist tendencies.

The Rejection of Accommodation to State

¶4. (U) Raphaela Schmid is the Rome director of an NGO focused on religious freedom, in addition to her duties at the Gregorian University. She said that with the Chinese authorities gradually accepting more religious activity, secularism and atheism are not the factors in Chinese society that they once were. Significant barriers to religious freedom, however, remain. According to Schmid, the Holy See cannot let setbacks take place without calling attention to them. She cited the illicit episcopal appointments of 2006 as an example. She argued that the Holy See needs to stand up to the state and not simply accommodate itself to such policies. At the same time, the Chinese Catholic Church, both underground and official, needs to make its teachings accessible so that it will be relevant to society.

The Global Presence of Christians

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¶5. (U) Cervellera argued against Schmid's "pessimistic outlook" on China, insisting that the outlook for religious freedom is positive. He believes that ultimately the presence of religious freedom and Christianity in China will be positive for economic development and in fact necessary; it is therefore in the GoC's interest to continue to make strides in this area. On Islam, Cervellera addressed India, claiming that Muslims were creating social upheaval in India. He described a growth of Hindu nationalism that he said had come in part as a response to aggressive Islam. Cervellera insisted that the presence of Christians, whether in South Asia or the Middle East, provided a moderate influence that could enhance the prospects for religious freedom and the stability of these regions. Cervellera noted what he saw as a conflicted relationship between Muslims and modernity; though for some Muslims modernity is a denial of faith, terrorists continue to use modern techniques as a means to their end. When questioned by an audience member on the effect of the 2008 Summer Olympics on China, Cervellera said that the games would be a great opportunity for China to open itself to the world, inevitably creating more favorable conditions for religious freedom.

Comment

¶6. (SBU) Since the Second Vatican Council some forty years ago, the Vatican has become the global center of discussion of religious freedom. While some conferences and programs on the

topic veer towards the theological, many address concrete religious liberty issues that directly impact U.S. interests. Cervellera and Schmid are frequent Embassy Vatican contacts.
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